

I Was Hungry
Matthew 25:31-40
March 12, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

I know I have told you before that my earliest and most profound memories of church all revolve around food. When I was five or six years old, my grandmother's tiny Baptist church held a dinner on the ground – what we would call a church picnic. The men of the church were breaking ground for the new sanctuary, and all the women brought great baskets of food to celebrate the occasion. My grandmother's contribution was fried chicken, buttermilk biscuits, banana pudding, and sweet iced tea. I could hardly wait for that meal to be served.

I can still feel the blustery Texas wind whipping my skirt around my legs. I can see my grandmother's red-checked tablecloth lying on the ground, anchored by family members and plates of food. I can smell my grandmother's chicken, and I can taste the rich chocolate cake baked by Mrs. Holley. Nearly 70 years later, I can still hear my great-grandfather offering the blessing before that meal, as he was always asked to do. I carry the memory of that dinner in all my physical senses, but I believe it made such a deep impression on me because it touched my spiritual sense as well. A dinner on the ground was an invitation to join the community of faith.

What I remember most from those early years is all the ways that food was used to show God's love. When people are in pain, my grandmother taught me to cook first and ask questions later. When God's people celebrate, somebody had better bake a cake. Jesus tells us over and over again to feed his sheep, and I take this instruction both literally and sacramentally.

I know that many of you were raised in the same way. We love to offer food personally to one another. Fellowship hour feels like a sacred time. And it hurts our hearts to think of a neighbor who is hungry, whether we know that person or not. That is why it is so easy for us to support the soup kitchen. It is why a Little Free Pantry is a ministry tailor-made for our church.

In our scripture text today, Jesus asks us to do several things – feed hungry people, give drink to those who thirst, welcome strangers, give clothing to folks who need it, take care of God's children who are sick, and visit prisoners. I think all of these come easily to us, except maybe visiting prisoners, and perhaps we will come back to that commandment some other week. But of all these commandments, it is feeding hungry people and welcoming strangers – usually with food – that are the most natural for this church.

It is easiest, of course, for us to feed those who are near – members and visitors, neighbors in any of the communities we serve. But there are hungry people all over the world, and in the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus makes it clear that our obligation is not just to those who are nearest at hand or most like us.

Fortunately, our money can go where we cannot. And when we combine our gifts with others throughout our denomination, we are able to accomplish things that we could not do alone. Even better, this year's One Great Hour of Sharing offering is focused on hunger. Here are some stories of people you have been helping in the past couple of years:

In the Santa Barbara district of Honduras, our gifts have supported a “pass chain” program. One family receives a pregnant pig, sheep, or cow. They feed it and care for it. When the next piglet, lamb, or calf is born, it is passed on to another family, who commit to do the same. In this same subsistence farming community, we have also helped to provide seeds and training to expand family farm production and cook stoves that reduce the need for wood. Our gifts helped the families in this Honduran community to build a sustainable future in which hunger is no longer the constant worry that it has been in the past.

In the Carazo region of Nicaragua, our offerings have helped families diversify their crops, so that one bad crop does not lead to disaster, and so that the families benefit from a broader diet. In this community our gifts have also supported water safety, irrigation, sanitation, and hygiene. One recipient named Mirabel said, “Thanks to the Pastor of the Nazarene Church, [this] program came to my community and my family life. I praise and bless [God's] name.” Because of hurricanes and COVID, Mirabel’s family has had to depend entirely on her subsistence garden in the past couple of years. She said, “May the Lord increase the blessings on [this] project, and on each of the brothers and sisters and their families who dedicate resources to our support....” She’s talking about all of us because we have given to One Great Hour of Sharing.

In the West Timor region of Indonesia, our offerings have helped to expand the land available to each family from micro-plots – about 100 square meters each – to 2.5 acres per family. With this additional land, families were able to plant more types of crops – not just Chinese cabbage and chilies as before, but also white mustards, kale, green beans, bitter melons, tomatoes, zucchinis, cucumbers, and papayas. Imagine what this did to the average family diet. In addition, each family now has extra produce to sell in the market at the district capital, so they now have cash income. Our gifts helped to make this possible.

The One Great Hour of Sharing offering is an effective way to feed hungry people – better yet, to make it possible for them to feed themselves. And our Gertrud Mathes Mission Matching Fund helps us to stretch our gifts even further. That’s why our little church was in the top 50 churches in the United Church of Christ last year in per-person giving to this offering – that is, our gifts from 2022, plus our matching fund for the offering we gave in the previous year put us in this top category. The Mission Board has challenged us to give \$1,000 to this offering again this year. We will dedicate our offering on the last Sunday of this month. I know you love to feed hungry people. I see you do it every single week. Let’s join together to feed some people we will never meet, God’s children who are living on the edge of hunger every single day.

There are so many things in the Bible that are hard for us to understand, or difficult for us to do. But this commandment is easy. “I was hungry,” Jesus said, “and you gave me food.” And “Truly I tell you, just as you do to the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.” I give thanks to God for clear instructions and thanks for loving hearts.

Amen